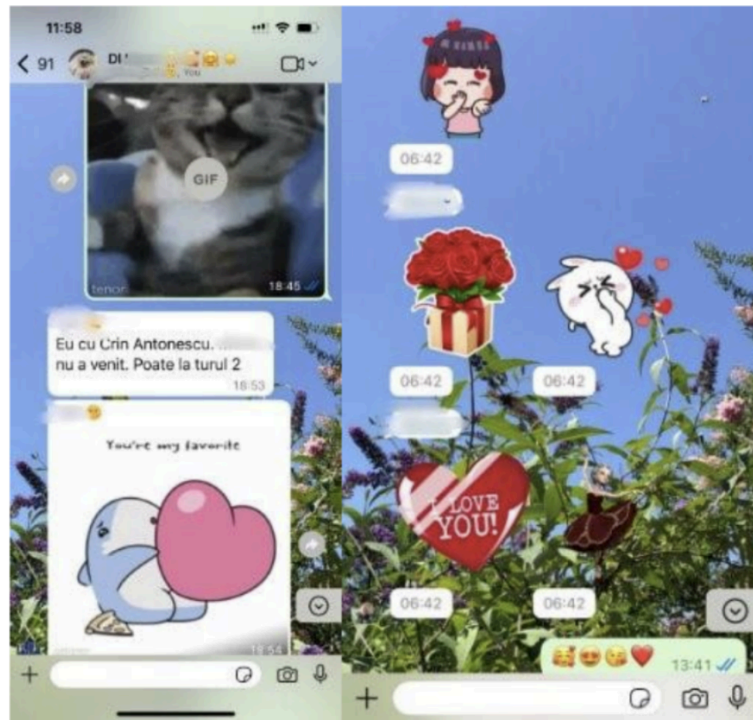


When we love and care across borders: practices of love and care for Romanian father-away families in Italy and the UK

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Screenshot of visual digital communication between my father and I

How do we love and care for close ones who live abroad? And how do we bring this love into research?

Anyone who has been part of families or relationships spanning across different countries and several borders may know how love and care start to take different forms when close ones are not physically present. Love and care may be *practised* through new ways: online calling, texting, sending photos or emoticons; gifts carefully packed in boxes or envelopes sent internationally; short or long visits; tight airport hugs; and feelings of missing someone, caring, loving, thinking, or distancing from them. These were all practices and feelings that my dissertation research explored, particularly in the context of Romanian families who live across different countries, known as transnational families.

The topic of transnational families resulting from family members' migration is particularly relevant to Romania as the European Union country with the highest emigration rates to other countries like Italy, Germany, and the UK. This migration rate accounts for approximately 26% of the country's population living abroad (European Union Global Diaspora Facility, 2023). Inspired by my own relationship with my Romanian father who left to work in Italy in

2010 when I was 8 years old, my dissertation explored the influence of gender in under-researched father-away Romanian transnational families in Italy and the UK. Since previous research predominantly explored transnational mothers' care and love, my project seeks to go beyond these limitations, echoing hook's (2004) critique that '*in our culture, we speak very little of our longing for father love*' (p. 4). While vulnerable, self-reflective, and often conflicted about my own loving relationship with my father beyond geographical distances, I interviewed other Romanian fathers living in Italy and the UK, as well as young people in Romania whose fathers migrated, to explore the complexity of transnational family life.

My research found that Romanian fathers migrated due to the repercussions of the global financial crisis in Romania, the loss of their jobs, and the need to survive according to better-paying opportunities in Western Europe. This decision was often difficult, the highest emotional cost being described by fathers as leaving their families and children at home with the other parent or grandparents. Nonetheless, I found that another important factor influencing the separation of Romanian transnational families was the parents' divorce frequently resulting in unequal maternal custody. This was a new topic to the literature on Romanian transnational families. While I was not originally planning to cover it due to the emotional complications of my parents' divorce, fathers' accounts of their divorce stories helped me uncover the injustices still present in divorce decisions in the world and Romania today, bringing therapeutic closure in my relationship with my father as well. The repercussions of divorce would ripple into other aspects of transnational family life, care and love, which I described as practices of *doing* and *being* family. Beyond previous research with transnational mothers, fathers would also practise *doing* and *caring for* their young people who remained in Romania: they would visit their families for both important events like weddings, baptisms, and regular holidays of 'being there' with each other; they would exchange gifts; and use digital communication platforms. Beyond limitations brought by divorce, fathers would describe the definition of *being* family with their transnational children through the importance of shared blood and the unconditionality of family relations despite estrangement and parental conflict. Furthermore, I found that both fathers and young people recognised the importance of persisting love beyond geographical distances. While some fathers were comfortable voicing and expressing love through acts of personal and domestic care, some fathers would resist love and view fatherhood according to norms of authority and guidance. According to these evolving gender norms of stoicism and emotional involvement, young people would often feel an emotional gap to their fathers, but would persist in loving them according to practices of understanding and forgiveness.

I consider my project to be an act of love to my father and other father-away transnational families I talked to. It portrays the complex negotiations of love and care according to an insider perspective to transnational family life beyond the often stigmatising literature on 'people who leave' and 'children who are left behind'. While difficult, this project was therapeutic and revealing. It showed me how some of the most important anthropological topics of all time: migration, kinship, care, and love may not always need to be ethnographically explored in far-off countries, but could start within our families and our own

life. I believe this reflects the love, intimacy, and care we can weave into our research, going beyond stereotypes of abandonment and transnational family life, and bringing anthropology closer to our everyday lives and relationships.



My father and I the first time I travelled to Naples, Italy

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